

Melissia Ann Elam Home

Preliminary Summary of Information
April 11, 1978

Commission on Chicago
Historical and Architectural Landmarks

Melissia Ann Elam Home
4726 South King Drive
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Henry L. Newhouse

Builder: Harper Brothers

Date of Construction: 1903

After World War I an increasing number of Negroes began migrating to Chicago, and there became a need for housing for single black working women. A number of homes or clubs were formed to meet this need. The Friendship Home was located at 3017 Prairie Avenue and maintained by the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Phyllis Wheatley Women's Club was located at 5128 South Michigan Avenue, and the Federated Women's Club was located at 4901 Drexel. The only home still existing today is the Melissia Ann Elam Home at 4726 South King Drive.

Melissia Ann Elam was born in Missouri in 1853 to slave parents. After the Emancipation she moved to Chicago where she worked as a maid. She later married Rubin Elam who was in real estate. While living in Chicago she discovered the lack of housing for black women in the city. In the mid 1920s the Elams purchased a house at 4555 South Champlain Avenue and opened it as the Melissia Ann Elam Home for Working Women and Girls.

Five or six girls lived in the home at the beginning. Each girl paid a low fee depending on her income. Work around the home was done by the girls and the moral standards of the Elam Home were strict. In the Elam Home the girls found guidance and wholesome companionship.

The purpose of the home was to encourage the girls to remain in school and to later go into business. The home also trained the girls and women in the ideals of good citizenship and tried to make them better women who would make a real contribution to the black people and to the nation. It was also hoped that the home would teach the girls to be self-respecting and self-supporting and instill in them habits of thrift. Mrs. Elam hoped that the girls would develop independence and economic preparedness. An advertisement in the Black Blue Book of 1921 stated that the Elam Home had home-like rooms with all the conveniences at reasonable rates and with the best moral surroundings.

As the number of girls seeking residence in the Elam Home grew, Mrs. Elam decided they needed a larger house. In the mid 1930s Mrs. Elam purchased the house at 4726 South Grand Boulevard (now Martin Luther King Drive) from Simon L. Marks.

Simon L. Marks built his house in 1903. Marks was the president of H. M. Marks and Company, a wholesale custom tailor. He was a member of the Standard Club. The architect was Henry L. Newhouse of 4630 South Prairie Avenue. Newhouse also designed the Dider Building at 50th Street and Grand Boulevard, the Patio Apartments at 51st Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, the Normond Court Apartments at Lake Park Avenue near 47th Street, and a mortuary chapel for Furth and Company. Harper Brothers were the builders of the Simon Marks House.

At the time the house was built King Drive was called Grand Boulevard. In 1923 the name was changed from Grand Boulevard to South Park Avenue and in 1968 to Martin Luther King Drive. The community of Grand Boulevard was part of the town of Hyde Park when that town was formed in 1861. Between 1874 and 1879, the South Park Commissioner's beautification of Grand Boulevard made the neighborhood more desirable, and fashionable homes were built in the area. In 1889, the Village of Hyde Park was annexed to the City of Chicago.

Between 1885 and 1895, the most wealthy and distinguished Jewish families began to move into the Grand Boulevard community. The Standard Club moved from 16th Street to 24th Street and Michigan, the Lake Side Club moved to 42nd Street and Grand Boulevard, and K.A.M. Temple moved to 50th Street and Drexel Avenue. Isaiah Israel Temple moved to 45th Street and Vincennes Avenue and Sinai Temple to 46th Street and Grand Boulevard. People belonging to these clubs and temples also moved nearer the center of the community where the community leaders lived. Between 1905 and 1919, some of the leading Jewish families of the city lived on Michigan and Grand from 35th Street to 51st Street. Later they moved to Hyde Park and Kenwood.

Beginning in the 1890s a few Negroes started to move into the community. The improvement of the economic status of the Negroes enabled them to begin to buy homes in the Grand Boulevard area. By 1930, the population of Grand Boulevard was 95% Negro. Around this time Mrs. Elam had purchased the Simon Marks House at 4726 South Grand Boulevard.

The Simon Marks House is an example of the style of architecture called Chateausque. The Chateausque style, often called the Francis I style, stems from the architecture of the reign of Francis I in 16th-century France. Because the Francis I style frequently contains a mixture of 15th-century elements, the term Chateausque is often preferred. In the United States the first Chateausque style

house was built in 1864-1868 at South Norwalk, Connecticut. A Danish architect by the name of Detlef Lienau designed the million-dollar mansion for railroad magnate LeGrand Lockwood.

In his book American Architecture Since 1870, Marcus Whiffen writes that the Chateausque style is characterized by masonry construction, asymmetrical plans and silhouettes with high, steep-sided hipped roofs rising to a ridge or flat top. These roofs are surmounted by metal railings or openwork metal cresting. Round turrets with conical "candle-snuffer" roofs are corbeled out from the walls at the second-floor level. Chimneys are tall and often fancifully treated. Dormers with high, pinnacled gables are universal to the style. Besides the roof treatment, the windows are the features that most readily identify the style. These windows are either linteled or have a segmental arch and are divided by masonry mullions and transoms.

The Simon Marks House is twenty-nine feet wide by eighty feet deep and forty-eight high. The house has three full stories and a basement. The exterior is of grey limestone. Unlike the typical Chateausque building, it has a symmetrical facade above the first floor. Twin turrets rising the heights of the second and third stories create this symmetry. Candle snuffer roofs of asphalt with copper trim crown the turrets. A decoratively trimmed dormer containing two windows is the focal point at the center of the third floor. Many of the windows in the house are of stained and leaded glass. Carved stonework decorates the frames of the linteled windows and entryway. Three gargoyles decorate the front entranceway. The trim and gutters are of copper. A wrought-iron fence extends along the front of the house.

The house has twenty rooms none of which have been altered. The interior is paneled in various woods. At one time all of the ceilings were decorated with stenciled canvas which was hand painted by a German craftsman. Many of the ceilings still display this beautiful work. Decorative shields are carved in the woodwork throughout the house.

A domed ceiling of ornately carved wood is a highlight of the foyer. Other features of this area are a door with leaded-glass windows, two stained-glass windows, and marble steps.

Built-in bookcases cover three walls of the parlor which is located at the front of the house. The fireplace is of Italian Carrara marble, and has a stained-glass panel above it. On either side of the fireplace are gas lamps from Germany. A sliding door separates the parlor from the music room. In the music room are four crystal chandeliers and a mirror which rests in an elaborately carved frame. The walls are stenciled with mythological figures.

The lower three quarters of the walls in the dining room are paneled. Above the paneling the wall is covered with a forest scene on stenciled canvas. This room contains a beautiful piece of stained glass depicting the German countryside which almost entirely covers the width of one wall. Beneath this stained glass is a built-in buffet. On either side of the buffet and entranceway are two mid-wall gas lamps.

A prominent feature of the main staircase is the elaborately carved newel at its foot. The newel is topped by a blue-green stained-glass lamp. At the bottom of the newel carved lion's paws support three intricately detailed eagles. Off the stair hall is a breakfast nook that looks out on the yard and at one time contained a goldfish pool.

Two stained-and leaded-glass windows decorate the second floor landing. A door of leaded glass depicting mythological figures leads to a smaller room. At one time there was a window in the smaller room which reflected light through the stained glass. A light inside the room can be turned on to create this same effect. The other window depicts grape vines.

The master suite consists of two rooms and a bathroom. Its main bedroom has a tile fireplace and a semi-circular window seat under four of the room's windows. There is a frieze along the ceiling and canvas paintings of flower vases along the walls. The master bedroom also has two built-in closets with leaded glass over the doors. Another feature of the second floor is a bathroom of solid marble. Children's quarters are separated from the rest of the second floor by sliding doors, and contain an oval alcove for play.

The third floor of the house contains the ballroom. At one time the domed ceiling contained leaded glass. The upper walls are covered with painted canvas depicting a garden scene. There are three sitting rooms around the ballroom.

The Elam Home accommodated approximately thirty-five young girls and women during its peak years 1928-1935. Between 1930 and 1950, the Elam Home was in constant demand for social, civic, and cultural affairs. The state convention for black women was held here in 1936. Many famous black artists attended receptions at the Elam Home. Forty-Seventh Street and South Park Avenue is mentioned in the poem "For My People" by Margaret Walker. Frank Marshall Davis, an important poet of what has been called the Negro Renaissance period of the 1920s named a book of his poems "Forty-Seventh Street." Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a leading advocate of equal rights for blacks and women was involved in the Elam Home. Mrs. Elam and Mrs. Barnett were both members of the Negro Fellowship League. The League fought for criminal justice for black men.

Mrs. Elam died in 1941 at the age of eighty-seven. Her neice Mrs. Loretta Peyton took over as trustee of the home and the position of trustee was kept in the family. Following Mrs. Peyton's death the position of trustee was handed down through the female descendants of Mrs. Elam. In May 1973, Mrs. Roberta Bruton who was the trustee at that time died. Mrs. Bruton's daughter was not interested in being named trustee and suggested that several persons share the responsibility of being trustees. A group of people incorporated as the Friends of the Elam Home and became temporary receivers. Presently they are in the process of having the Friends of the Elam Home made a permanet trustee.

During the 1950s with the development of more institutions to meet the needs of housing the black single working woman and with society's acceptance of women living in their own homes or apartments, the number of women seeking residence in the Elam Home declined. Presently there are six women living in the home. Future plans are to renovate the house and provide housing for the elderly.